DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 133 625 CG 008 338

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TITLE The Impact of Education and Experience on Rehabilitation Counselor Functioning.
PUB DATE [72]
NOTE 15p.; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Counseling Effectiveness; *Counselor Evaluation; Counselor Performance; *Counselors; *Educational Experience; Educational Research; Higher Education; *Rehabilitation Counseling; *Work Experience

ABSTRACT

Education and experience are two variables generally accepted to have a positive effect on job performance in general and in professional areas in particular. This study sought to evaluate the effects of varying degrees of education and experience on performance in the field of rehabilitation counseling. The study compared Master's degree and undergraduate degree counselors of high and low experience on the basis of client ratings of counselors, ratings of counseling effectiveness and number of clients rehabilitated. The findings indicated that neither education nor experience had a significant impact on client ratings of counselors or the number of clients rehabilitated. Both education and experience affected counseling effectiveness although in opposite directions. Increased education significantly detracts from it. It was noted that these findings tended to support research in other occupational areas regarding the impact of education and experience on job performance. (Author)

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ED133625

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THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE ON REHABILITATION COUNSELOR FUNCTIONING

Considerable differences of opinion presently exist regarding the background education and experience that promotes more effective rehabilitation counselor functioning. Many rehabilitation agencies employ individuals to function in the counselor role with an undergraduate as well as Master's degrees. There appears to be a generally held assumption in most occupational fields that experience has a positive impact on functioning in the work role. A valid question concerns how much graduate level training and work experience contribute to actual counselor functioning.

Some research has been carried out in areas relevant to these questions. Anthony (1970) for example, compared first semester students in a rehabilitation counselor training program with fourth semester students in the program. He found that the fourth semester rehabilitation counseling students emitted significantly higher levels of facilitative conditions. Kennedy and Anthony (1972) organized a study which was designed to evaluate the impact of the counselors' experience and training on the counseling of the physically disabled client. The researchers were particularly interested in determining whether or not counselors with Master's degrees in rehabilitation counseling differed from other counselors with comparable education and experience with respect to 1) counselors level of facilitative conditions;

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2) counselors ability to employ the action oriented dimensions of confrontation; and 3) counselors ability to involve clients in deep self-exploration. In this study it was found that counselors with Master's degrees in rehabilitation counseling were not significantly different from counselors with other Master's degrees and similar experience.

There has been some evidence which suggests that a counselors ability to be helpful in the counseling relationship actually declines as his educational level increases (Truax, 1966). Truax (1967) investigated the trainability of lay persons in critical counseling areas. He provided training to several such persons and subsequently compared their functioning levels with that of graduate students in clinical and counseling psychology, and with a group of experienced practicing counselors. No significant differences were found between these groups suggesting that with training it is possible for individuals with little formal academic preparation to develop critical counseling skills at a level comparable to that of counselors with considerable experience. Other related research literature has been summarized periodically by Carkhuff (1969), Carkhuff and Barringson (1967), Rogers (1967), and Truax and Carkhuff (1967).

It appears to the authors that there is a generally held belief in the field that the more experience an individual has, the more effective he will be able to function in the rehabilitation counseling role. Research into the specific contribution of experience to effective rehabilitation counseling functioning has not been so prevalent as has been the research effort on the role of education; however, experience generally appears to be considered a

positive factor in the applicants background. This statement is supported by the fact that organizations and agencies generally will start an employee at a higher salary if he has relevant experience. Many organizations also provide a number of routine pay increases as the employee remains on the job. This situation of course is not unique to rehabilitation, as other occupations often have similar practices. It is interesting to note, however, that research into the relationship of work experience and performance has indicated that, at least for some occupations, the contribution of experience to performance is negligible and perhaps even a slightly negative factor (Fiedler, 1970).

In summary, it appears useful to investigate some of the assumptions regarding the contribution of education and experience to rehabilitation counselor functioning. This study sought to place these two variables in a single research design to investigate the validity of these assumptions in a rehabilitation agency setting and to evaluate the possible interaction of these variables.

METHODOLOGY

The basic design of this study was experimental although controls and data gathering procedures were similar to survey and post hoc format. The independent variables in this study were the relative degree of education and experience of the subjects. The dependent variables included ratings of the effectiveness of the counselors' responses, client ratings of counselors, and number of clients rehabilitated.

Certain variables that threatened to confound the effects of the independent variable were controlled mechanically. Counselors were selected with similar types of case loads and where possible, from similar settings. A 2 x 2 factorial design was used to evaluate findings.

Subjects:

The subjects were selected from a population of 387 counselors, all of whom were from the North Carolina Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's active counselor roster. The subjects selected first were counselors holding graduate degrees in guidance and counseling, rehabilitation counseling, or psychology plus at least six months of experience as a practicing rehabilitation counselor. The second step involved identifying counselors with bachelor's degrees who occupied similar case loads and had similar experience as a rehabilitation counselor. These procedures generally identified several counselors with bachelor's degrees as possible matches for each Master's degree counselor. Random numbers were assigned to each potential match, which permitted the final selection to be made on a random basis.

Graduate degree counselors were defined as counselors who held Master's degrees in rehabilitation counseling, guidance and counseling, or psychology. Undergraduate counselors held bachelor's degrees. No specific undergraduate majors were required for inclusion in this group although most majors were in the social science-psychology field. These counselors had received relevant training; however, as in North Carolina undergraduate counselors are placed in a structured two-year in-service program that includes orientation training, counseling skills, and training in special areas as needed. The basic training format includes a three-week orientation training program, special one to two week training in special areas, night classes at colleges and universities, correpondence courses and seminars.

Utilizing the procedures described above, sixty counselors were identified and selected to participate in the study. These included thirty counselors who entered the agency with a bachelor's degree and thirty

counselors who held Master's degrees. These counselors varied in experience from nine months to five years as rehabilitation counselors. During the course of the study, eight subjects dropped out leaving a total of 52 total subjects to participate in this study. The counselors selected represented a variety of case loads. The breakdown according to special case load area was as follows: deaf - 2, SSDI - 4, mental retardation - 20, social service - 8, mental health - 8, corrections - 6, and general counselors - 4.

Instrumentation:

Several measurement procedures were utilized for obtaining data relevant to the criteria of the study. Instruments used in the study were as follows:

Client statement stimuli, video tape ratings. One of the questions under consideration was concerned with the counselors ability to function effectively as helping persons. The counselors were asked to respond to certain client's statements provided via video tape and their responses to these statements were evaluated by having three independent judges rate the level of facilitation-action present. The judges utilized a Carkhuff procedure (1969, V. I, P. 123).

Client ratings of counselors. A short questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of clients on the active case rosters of the counselors participating in the study. Client's opinions as expressed on these questionnaires constituted the evaluation of the counselors by their clients.

Clients rehabilitated. This information was obtained by the North Carolina State agency's data processing system. This data consisted of the number of clients rehabilitated (closed 26) for the fiscal year 1972.

RESULTS

Table I presents the results of the impact of experience and education on client ratings of counselors. None of the relationships tested by the 2 x 2 factorial in this table were significant. The differences based on education yielded an f of .39 which was not significant. The differences between the less experienced and more experienced counselors yielded an f of 2.19. The test for interaction of experience and education on this variable yielded an f of 1.7 which was also nonsignificant at the .05 level. Neither education nor experience significantly influenced this variable.

To evaluate the impact of experience and education on rehabilitation counseling skill and the possible interaction of these variables, comparisons were made based on counselor responses to video taped stimuli. The results of the investigation of this variable are presented in Table II. It can be noted from the table that both education and experience had a significant impact on rehabilitation counselor functioning on this variable. Graduate training has the greater impact as the comparison of the level of functioning of counselors with Master's degrees as compared to bachelor's degrees yielded an f of 4.75 which has a probability of less than .03. The results indicated that counselors with Master's degrees function at a significantly higher level than counselors with bachelor's degrees. It was found, however, that the more experienced counselors in this study functioned at a lower level than inexperienced counselors and this difference yielded an f of 3.89 which was significant at the .05 level. The test for interaction of these two variables yielded an f of 3.48, a difference which was not significant at the .05 level, but which does indicate a trend toward the interaction of these two variables.

The impact of education and experience on clients rehabilitated by counselors is presented in Table III. The results indicate that neither education nor experience has a significant impact on the number of clients rehabilitated. The difference reported for the counselors holding Master's degrees and those holding bachelor's degrees yielded an f of .001 which was not significant. The differences reported for counselors with less experience compared to those with more experience yielded and f of .059, also an insignificant difference. The test for interaction of the experience and education variables on clients rehabilitated yielded an f of .43 which indicates that these variations could be attributable to chance.

Conclusions and Implications

This research confirms the notions that increased counselor education does positively affect counseling skills. There was no evidence that either experience or education had significant impact on the other variables under consideration, client ratings and clients rehabilitated. Additionally, there were no statistically significant interactions between experience and education although there were trends in that direction.

The implications of this study are numerous, but the principle ones will be highlighted herein. The first has to do with the counselor training process itself. Possibly, counselor training as an art form has not developed, by plan or fortuity, the kinds of strategems that improve counselors skills in enhancing client's positive ratings of or their attitudes toward the rehabilitation case work system or improve counselor's ability to obtain large numbers of successful rehabilitation. One could argue that counselors interest in obtaining larger

numbers of successful closures enjoys a lesser priority as a consequence of education. Thus, counselors could acquire the skills to increase successful rates, but opt to work at facilitating a broad spectrum of client growth of which vocational placement is a process rather than a terminal point. Accordingly, the idea that "quality closures" rather than "quantity closures" result from counselor's increased academic preparation gains increased credulity as per the findings of this research.

The finding that increased counseling experience seemed not to have had any salutary effect on the variables selected for study is consistent with the findings of other researchers, particularly Fred Fiedler's 1970 studies. The implications of this finding in terms of implimenting it into existing rehabilitation personnel policies is frightening, but the finding as a fact is understandable. That some individuals decrease in performance as a result of increasing experience is not surprising. Many persons get bored, arrogant or slipshod when the task becomes too easy or too structured; they need constant challenges to perform at an optimal level. Others need continuity and routine. The appropriate prescription for each type of counselor is seemingly dependent upon a flexible personnel system and enlightened rehabilitation management.

Another way to look at the problem is to hypothesize that performance is largely situationally determined. Thus, to increase performance, it may be advisable to increase the favorableness of his work, rather than changing the individual through training, planned management/worker leadership interaction, etc. This appears to open a fruitful avenue for intensive further exploration on this terribly important problem of experience in counseling which has become an unquestioned yet unsubstantiated characteristic.

TABLE I

CLIENT RATING

Experience

Education	2	2+
MA	107 N=12	109 N=9
BA	100 N=6	116 N=13

Rows, F=.39 - P>.53
Columns, F=2.19 - P>.14
Interaction, F=1.7 - P>.15

TABLE II

RATINGS OF COUNSELING EFFECTIVENESS

Experience

Education	2	2+
MA	2.5 N=16	1.9 N=10
BA	1.9 N=10	1.9 N=16

Rows, F=4.75 - P<.03
Columns, F=3.89 - P<.05
Interaction, F=3.48 - P>.07

TABLE III

CLIENTS REHABILITATED

Experience

Education	2	2+
MA	26 N=10	35 N=5
BA	30 N=7	27 N=8

Rows, F=.001 - P>.97
Columns, F=.059 - P>.81
Interaction, F=.43 - P>.51

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